

The Second Read

Chapter 1: The Packet

On Thursday, the yearbook pages come back.

Chuma, sixteen, wrote the class-history section - twelve pages, the story of their four years, with the profiles she interviewed for all winter. Twenty-two interviews. She has a folder of index cards with quotes, and she checked every date against the school calendar twice, because dates are the kind of thing editors catch.

She has been half-expecting praise. She told no one this, obviously.

What she gets is a packet that looks wounded.

Red on the first page. Red on the second. Red slashes, red question marks, whole red lines through paragraphs she read out loud to herself twice. On top, a cover note in the faculty editor's handwriting, and the handwriting itself looks angry:

"This reads like a diary. See me. - Morah"

The committee room is very quiet. Chuma puts the packet in her bag without reading another word, which is the only dignified move available to her.

Chapter 2: The Sting

At home, the packet sits on the desk like a bad grade that followed her home.

She does her homework around it. She sets the table around it. At nine o'clock there is nothing left to do around it.

She tries to read it properly and cannot. Her eyes keep catching single words - "chatty," "indulgent," "why is this here" - and skipping the sentences around them. The red is everywhere. On the third page, a whole paragraph is crossed out, and it is the paragraph she liked best, the one about the snow day.

She counts the red marks on that page, because counting is something she can still do. Eleven. One page, eleven marks. She does not read what they say. She cannot, yet.

I interviewed twenty-two girls, she thinks. I checked every date twice. She read it in an afternoon and killed it in red.

She considers quitting the committee. She drafts the resignation in her head while brushing her teeth, and it is a very good resignation, noble and wounded.

By bedtime she has not read the packet. She has only read the anger, hers and Morah's, which is not the same as reading the review.

Chapter 3: Fradel's Rule

The next morning, at breakfast, her mother takes one look at her face and says, "Eat first. Red ink sits easier on a full stomach," which is not advice exactly, but is true. Her father offers to "have a word with the school," in the tone of a man who already knows the answer, and Chuma says no thank you, and the no is shaky, but it is hers.

At school, Fradel finds her.

Fradel is in twelfth grade, the co-editor, and she has survived three years of Morah's red.

"First read is for the sting," Fradel says. "You had it. Everybody gets one. The sting is allowed a day."

"And then?"

"Second read is with a pencil. You read it again and you mark only what's fixable and true. Not fixable and mean. Not fixable and taste. Fixable and true." Fradel has done this so many times she says it like a recipe. "Her red is weather. There's rain in it you can use and there's thunder you can ignore. Take the rain."

"What if there isn't any rain?"

"There's always rain," Fradel says. "That's the thing about Morah. She's harsh and she's usually right about two things. Your job is to find which two."

Chapter 4: The Second Read

On Sunday afternoon, Chuma does the second read, with a pencil, on the porch, slowly.

The first ten minutes are awful, because the sting is not finished with her, and every red mark still lands like a small slap. She keeps reading. The rule helps. She is not reading a verdict on herself. She is shopping - and a shopper can put the rude things back on the shelf.

The snow day paragraph, killed in red? She reads it again, slowly, pencil ready. Morah's note in the margin says: "sweet, but it is four sentences of weather."

Chuma checks the page. It is four sentences of weather. It is also the class's whole winter, and the girls who will read this yearbook in ten years will stop on exactly those four sentences. She moves the pencil on. Taste. Thunder. Let it go.

By page four, she has her first one: the dates. In the class history, she has the ski trip before the bake sale, but the bake sale was actually first - and worse, the whole middle section jumps years without warning. She checked the dates against the school calendar twice, and the calendar was right and her order is still confusing. Fixable. True. Underlined.

By page nine, the second: the profiles. She quoted girls mid-joke, without the context, and in print two of the jokes read as rudeness. She was there; she knows they were funny. A reader was not there. Fixable - add the setup lines. True. Underlined.

The rest of the red - and there is so much of it - is taste. "Chatty." "Indulgent." A line through her opening anecdote, the one about the lost hamster, with "cut this" in the margin.

She almost argues with the margin - out loud, on the porch, to nobody: "The hamster STAYS." Then she hears herself, and laughs once, because arguing with a margin is not one of the options. The options are fixable-and-true, or let it go. Or - she is beginning to see there is a third kind - keep it on purpose, with reasons, and be ready to say the reasons out loud.

The hamster, she suspects, is going to be the third kind. She does not write anything next to it. You do not mark a thing you are keeping. You just keep it, and you know why.

Chapter 5: The Sorting

Chuma looks at what the pencil found.

Two fixes, out of all that red. She checks the count twice, because it seems too small - and that, she realizes, is exactly the pencil's job: the red looked like a verdict on everything, and it was weather on everything, and rain on exactly two things. The page count of what she is keeping is far longer than the count of what she is changing. That surprises her more than the red did.

Two fixes. Both real. She can see exactly how to do them, and seeing it, she has to admit the pages will be better.

The opening anecdote is different. "Cut this" is not fixable-and-true; it is an opinion. The hamster story does a job - it tells the reader, in one page, what kind of class this is. She can say that out loud, with a straight face, with reasons.

Take the rain, she thinks. The two fixes are rain. The thunder is "this reads like a diary" - and my section does not read like a diary, it reads like us.

She will fix the two. She will keep the hamster, and say why, politely.

That is the whole skill, she realizes. Not fighting the red. Not obeying it. Sorting it.

Chapter 6: See Me

On Monday, Chuma goes to Morah's office with the packet, the pencil, and her two underlines.

Morah does not smile. Morah has possibly never smiled.

"You found the dates," Morah says, when Chuma shows the first fix. "Good. The order was a swamp."

"The profiles," Chuma says, "I'll add the setup lines, so the jokes have their context."

Morah nods once.

"And the opening," Chuma says. "I'd like to keep it. It tells the reader what kind of class we are, in one page, before the dates start. The diary feeling - I think that comes from the profiles being loose, which the context fixes."

There is a silence. Morah looks at her for a long moment.

"Keep it," Morah says. "Bring me the fixes by Thursday." And then, unbelievably, as Chuma reaches the door: "The hamster was the only page I read twice."

Chapter 7: The Rewrite

The fixes take two evenings, and they hurt a little, the way cleaning hurts - and then the pages come out the other side different.

On the first evening she rebuilds the dates section from the calendar up, and it is boring work, and at the end of it the section reads like a road instead of a sack of years.

The next day she finds three of the profiled girls - two at recess, one by the lockers - and verifies the quotes: "you said this about the trip, right? I'm putting back what you said it was about." Two of them laugh and say they had forgotten the good part, which was the setup. The third reads her quote twice and says only, "You made me sound smarter than I am," which Chuma takes as a yes. That evening she writes the setup lines in.

The dates section reads like a path now instead of a jumping game. The profiles breathe: the jokes land the way they landed in the interviews, because the setup lines carry the room into the print.

Chuma reads the new version against the old one, and there is no getting around it: the red was weather, and two rains of it were real.

There is a third evening, not for fixing but for the hamster paragraph. She reads it aloud to herself twice, checks the reasons one more time - it tells the reader, in one page, what kind of class this is - and leaves it exactly where it is. The leaving feels different from how keeping it would have felt on Friday. Last week, keeping it would have been pride. Now it is a decision with reasons attached.

She notices something else. Taking the two fixes did not require surrendering anything. Her voice is still on every page. The thunder - "chatty," "indulgent," the diary line - she let all of it go, and the pages are not worse for the letting go. They are hers, plus two repairs.

At the next committee meeting, Fradel reads the rebuilt pages standing up, and this time she says nothing for longer.

"The dates section," she says finally. "It reads like a road."

"That was the job," Chuma says. "Before, it was a sack of years."

"It was," Fradel says, and hands the pages back. "This is the first time I've watched somebody take Morah's rain without drowning, and without pretending it's sunny. Keep the pencil."

Chuma keeps the pencil. It lives in her bag now, next to the good eraser - not a weapon anymore, just a tool with a specific job.

A review is a mine, not a verdict, she writes in her notebook. You dig out the metal. You leave the dirt. You do not eat the dirt to be polite.

Chapter 8: The Proof

In May, the proof pages come to the committee for initialing.

The class history is all there, tight and warm, and the hamster is on the first one, exactly where she put him.

Fradel reads the section standing up, over Chuma's shoulder, and says nothing, and then says, "Two rains. You found good ones."

Chuma reads her pages one last time. The dates walk in order. The jokes have their setups. The opening line is the line she fought for in an office with no smiles in it.

She initials the proof sheet at the bottom, small and clear, and passes it down the table.

Eight activities

Activity 1: The two reads

From the story, describe the first read and the second read. What is each one for? What goes wrong if the first read is skipped - or if there is only a first read?

Activity 2: Rain or thunder?

Label each fictional review comment R (rain - fixable and true, take it) or T (thunder - taste, tone, or a jab, let it go).

1. "Chapter two says the trip was in March, but chapter four says April."
2. "This is babyish."
3. "You never say what happened to the money."
4. "I don't like your main character."
5. "The last paragraph repeats the first."
6. "Nobody writes like this anymore." Then: what makes 1 and 4 different, when both might sting the same?

Activity 3: Keeping the hamster

Chuma keeps the opening anecdote and says why. What is her reason? Why is keeping it NOT the same as ignoring the review? What is the difference between extraction and surrender, in her week?

Activity 4: Review arithmetic (all numbers made up for practice)

A review has 30 comments. 6 are fixable-and-true, 20 are taste, 4 are pure jabs. What percent is rain? If the writer fixes all 6 rains in 2 evenings, how many fixes per evening? If she had also fought the 4 jabs at 15 minutes each, how much time would that have cost for zero improvement? Show your steps.

Activity 5: "The only page I read twice"

Morah never apologizes for her tone, and the story never asks her to. What does her last line tell Chuma - and the reader - about the thunder? Does a harsh reviewer being partly right make the harshness kind? (Honest answers can disagree.)

Activity 6: Draw the packet

Draw the packet on Chuma's desk during the second read: the red marks, the pencil, the two underlined spots. Only what can be seen - no labels for feelings. Caption with one line from the story.

Activity 7: Zinna's recipes - planning for a fictional case

A teen named Zinna writes the recipe column for the class newsletter, and the faculty advisor returns her column with a harsh note and eleven red comments. Write what her first read is for, what the pencil does on the second read, two plausible rain comments, and one thing she might keep with a reason. One sentence each, with names.

Activity 8: Word grid

Find eight words left to right. Row/column numbering begins at 1.

Q Z X J R E D B F Y
P A G E L M N O R S
T C D E A M A R K J
K T A K E Y G H U P
L M N L E A V E D E
A I Q Z X T R U E B
F I X H U P L M N O
R S T C D E T W O Z
X J K V W B F Y G H
U P L M N O R S T C

RED, PAGE, MARK, TAKE, LEAVE, TRUE, FIX, TWO. Which two words name what Chuma does with the rain and what she does with the thunder?